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**HISTORIC PRESERVATION REVIEW BOARD  
STAFF REPORT AND RECOMMENDATION**

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Landmark/District:	<b>Capitol Hill Historic District</b>	(x) Agenda
Address:	<b>420-430 3<sup>rd</sup> Street, NE and 208, 214, and 236 Massachusetts Avenue, NE</b>	( ) Consent
		(x) Concept
Meeting Date:	<b>February 28, 2013</b>	(x) Alteration
Case Number:	<b>13-107</b>	(x) New Construction
Staff Reviewer:	<b>Amanda Molson</b>	(x) Demolition
		(x) Subdivision

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The Heritage Foundation, with plans prepared by Nelson Architects, PC, and Cunningham Quill Architects, PLLC, requests concept review for a project that involves razing a non-contributing building, subdivision to create new lots, and new construction at 420-430 3<sup>rd</sup> Street, NE. The project also includes additions and site alterations to 208, 214, and 236 Massachusetts Avenue, NE. The properties are located in the Capitol Hill Historic District.

**Property Description**

The Heritage Foundation currently owns its main headquarters building at 214 Massachusetts Avenue, NE, a multi-story building used for residential purposes at 208 Massachusetts, a multi-story building used for offices with ground-floor retail space at 236 Massachusetts, and a mid-block surface parking lot entered from 3<sup>rd</sup> Street. The applicants also own the vacant parcel at 426 3<sup>rd</sup> Street, NE, which was occupied by the Unity Baptist Church building until its demolition was approved by the Board in 2011 due to a loss of integrity. Additionally, the applicants have more recently acquired the apartment building located at 428 3<sup>rd</sup> Street, NE and a narrow vacant lot directly to the north of the apartment building.

Not included in this project are the Armand's Pizzeria building at 226 Massachusetts Avenue, NE or the multi-unit residential building at 412 3<sup>rd</sup> Street, NE, both of which are under separate ownership.

**Proposal**

The applicants propose to raze the apartment building located at 428 3<sup>rd</sup> Street, NE. The area currently occupied by the vacant lot at 430, the apartment building at 428, the former church building at 426, and part of the parking lot would be subdivided to create six new lots. Six single-family rowhouses and a one-story accessory structure would be constructed atop several levels of below-grade parking for both the rowhouses and the applicant's offices on Massachusetts Avenue. The existing curb cut on 3<sup>rd</sup> Street would be retained, but shifted slightly to the south in order to make room for the townhouses.

A one-story rear addition is proposed for the main headquarters building at 214 Massachusetts Avenue, NE. Other changes in this area would include construction of a small service structure to house venting and stairs down to the garage, a new mid-block courtyard, and garden walls surrounding the backyards of the new townhouses.

Grading and hardscaping changes are proposed for the front yard of the corner property at 236 Massachusetts Avenue, NE, along with improvements to this building's existing entry doors and canopies. Further, site alterations are proposed to expand the outdoor restaurant space at the corner of 3<sup>rd</sup> and Massachusetts and to provide a new sidewalk café on 3<sup>rd</sup> Street. Finally, the existing penthouse on top of 236 Massachusetts is proposed for expansion in footprint, retaining the existing height.

### **Evaluation**

The applicants have consulted closely with HPO as the plans have been developed. Discussions about the project date back to the Board's approval to raze the non-contributing church building on 3<sup>rd</sup> Street in 2011, and the current plans represent several months of hard work by the applicants to carefully detail the many aspects of this proposal for Board review. This project represents a welcome opportunity to improve the condition of public space on Massachusetts Avenue and to enhance the residential character of 3<sup>rd</sup> Street by replacing vacant lots and an austere non-contributing apartment building with compatibly scaled, well designed rowhouses.

### *Raze*

HPO has carefully reviewed archival permits and maps and has determined that the existing building at 428 3<sup>rd</sup> Street, NE is non-contributing due to its date of construction. The period of significance for Capitol Hill extends through 1945, and the subject property was built c. 1960. It is within the Board's purview to approve raze applications for non-contributing buildings without further review by the Mayor's Agent.

Although a building permit was issued in 1941 to construct a brick apartment building at this address, evidence indicates that the building for which that permit was issued was never actually constructed. That building was described in the 1941 permit as a three-story structure with an H-shaped footprint that spanned the width of the lot. In contrast, the current building is not H-shaped, and it includes a side court with recessed entrance on the right (north) side. City tax records and Baist insurance maps establish that no building was constructed at this address until after the mid-1950s. The city taxed this lot as vacant property until sometime between 1955 and 1960, and the 1956 Baist map shows the lot as vacant. The 1967 Baist map shows a building with a footprint matching the existing four-story structure, indicating that the existing building was constructed sometime in the 1960s. The design of the existing building – essentially an unarticulated brick box with “modern” three-part steel windows – is also consistent with 1960s-era construction.

### *Subdivision*

The proposal to subdivide the existing parcels to create six new townhouse lots is consistent with the purposes of the preservation act. The proposed lot sizes are comparable in width and depth with many others on Capitol Hill and are appropriate for a square already occupied by a number

of houses on both 3<sup>rd</sup> Street and E Street. The bay windows proposed for the townhouses would project into public space, as is typical on Capitol Hill.

#### *New Construction – Townhouses and Garage*

The applicants have selected a traditional, three-story, brick bayfront design for the six new townhouses. Consistent with Capitol Hill's historic development pattern of speculative rows interspersed with stand-alone houses, the row will be centered by three "mates," flanked by a house with a corner turret on the left and two slightly differentiated houses with mansard roofs on the right. Though the houses are taller than the somewhat diminutive apartment building at 432 3<sup>rd</sup> Street, they provide a graceful step-down in height between the taller buildings close to and on Massachusetts Avenue and the smaller historic rowhouses on the east side of 3<sup>rd</sup> Street and around the corner on E Street.

The rowhouse designs have taken cues from surrounding historic buildings, including the covered entrances, mansard roofs, canted bays, peaked parapets, and corner turrets. The general massing and design direction are compatible with the character of the Capitol Hill Historic District. As the plans are further developed, details and information for further Board review should include: material samples for façade elements, proposed materials and design for front yard retaining walls and fencing, proposed roofing material for the corner turret and mansard roofs, and possible enlargement of window opening sizes to improve proportions.

The design of the new garage and pedestrian entrance on 3<sup>rd</sup> Street has posed some challenges, and the applicants have worked closely with HPO to develop a sympathetic proposal given certain limitations. Though the entry structure is essentially an accessory building and would therefore logically be located towards the rear of the property, a more generous setback poses problems in achieving the ceiling clearance needed for vehicles to traverse the underground garage. As a result, the structure has been recessed a few feet behind the building restriction line, but it is still visually a part of the streetscape. Though the introduction of a garage door roughly in line with the face of residential buildings is not an ideal solution, the applicants have found ways to help the building reflect the residential character of this block.

Understanding the Board's sensitivity to garage doors on street-facing elevations, the structure has been designed as more of a "garden wall" element. The garage doors are reminiscent of period stable doors, the pedestrian access opening features an attractive metal gate, and brick corbeling at the roofline adds a decorative element. The rooftop of the garage is planned for use as a terrace area for the corner house, and views of a bay projection and outdoor area will be buffered by a pergola on the roof of the garage. While the pergola adds further height to the garage structure, it is hoped that it will help block views of the inescapable "clutter" associated with roof decks and that it will proactively provide a well-articulated design solution to the future owner's inevitable desire for privacy.

The proposed underground parking garage, which extends down three levels closest to 3<sup>rd</sup> Street and four levels mid-square, is not inconsistent with other below-grade garages approved by the Board on similarly large projects. Recent proposals approved by the Board that contained sizable underground garages on Capitol Hill include the MedLink project at 700 Constitution Avenue, NE, the Maples at 619 D Street, SE, and the Hine development at 7<sup>th</sup> Street and

Pennsylvania Avenue, SE. Though archeological investigation is not required here, given that the work is wholly on private property, the City Archeologist has received a copy of the plans and will provide any comments to the applicants.

#### *Addition, Courtyard, and Accessory Structure*

The project includes a one-story rear addition to the main headquarters building at 214 Massachusetts Avenue, NE. Sited mid-square and buffered from view by the new buildings along 3<sup>rd</sup> Street, the addition is certainly subordinate and deferential in size to the much larger building. Other mid-square changes include a new courtyard extending along the backyards of the new townhouses, garden walls encircling the townhouse backyards themselves, and a one-story accessory structure along the alley to provide venting and staircase access to the parking garage. As with the addition, these elements are largely screened from view, and the area currently features an unattractive cooling tower, surface parking, and other service-based elements.

#### *Penthouse*

The existing penthouse structure on the roof of the corner building at 236 Massachusetts Avenue, NE is rather diminutive in footprint, and the applicants have indicated that the placement of new mechanical equipment on the roof will require an enclosure. The existing penthouse extends 12' above the roof and is visible in long views of the building further up Massachusetts Avenue. The applicants propose to expand the footprint, maintaining the existing height and holding the face of the penthouse back 22' on the Massachusetts Avenue side and 14' on the 3<sup>rd</sup> Street side. Sightline drawings show that the penthouse enlargement will not be visible in immediate views from the across the street, though it will be visible in longer views up Massachusetts Avenue, as is the current structure.

In reviewing penthouses, the Board has generally required that they be properly finished in a material appropriate and compatible for the building (for instance, brick on a brick building), set back substantially from the façade, and reduced in height as much as possible. The penthouse proposed in this project incorporates those principles.

#### *Public Space and Façade Alterations*

The three existing door entrances on Massachusetts Avenue were altered in recent decades to include visually obtrusive projecting canopies and awnings, and non-original metal doors. The applicants plan to improve these conditions by installing more streamlined canopies supported by tie rods attached to the building and by installing better quality doors.

Perhaps the most challenging aspect of this project has been the public space alterations proposed on Massachusetts Avenue and 3<sup>rd</sup> Street, in large part due to an uneven, inherited grade condition on Massachusetts Avenue. Additionally, the applicants wish to expand the existing outdoor café space at the corner of 3<sup>rd</sup> and Massachusetts and construct a new outdoor terrace on 3<sup>rd</sup> Street.

The current condition of the public space on Massachusetts Avenue is in substantial need of improvement. It is currently consumed in large part by a circular driveway, limited green space, and a large sign on the corner. Locating and easily reaching the desired entrance door for each

establishment is confusing, and handicapped access is not provided. It would be easy to arrive at a proposal that incorporates a central set of steps and more direct ramps, but this would not take into account the fact that all three entry doors on Massachusetts Avenue sit at slightly different grade levels and serve different businesses. Without substantially altering the entry doors and changing interior floor levels, the best solution is the series of intersecting steps and ramps shown in the proposal. Though not ideal, the plan responds to complicated grade and building conditions and is a marked improvement over the existing. It will result in greatly increased green space and the introduction of handicapped access.

The applicants have developed several iterations of the expanded corner seating area, and worked to minimize its visual impact. Early plans showed an elevated deck structure with railings. Setback minimally from the sidewalk, the result would have been overwhelming for pedestrian traffic and an interruption in views across and around the corner. The plans have been improved considerably, with the existing berm slightly raised and an area of planting space provided between the seating area and sidewalk. The result is a patio area that rests on the existing landscape, rather than profoundly altering it. Given the expanses of paving at other nearby restaurants, this is a compatible treatment at this already commercial corner. The plan also includes the conversion of one side window facing 3<sup>rd</sup> Street into a door to serve the seating area, which is a discreet and reasonable change given the large size of the building.

The plan to introduce a new terrace in the public space on 3<sup>rd</sup> Street raises several preservation concerns. As proposed, this element of the project would remove a substantial portion of the continuous berm and retaining wall on 3<sup>rd</sup> Street, replacing it with a sidewalk café. Though most of the café area would sit at the same grade as the sidewalk, the portion closest to the building would be sunken below-grade in order to accommodate entry to two new door openings.

Though the actual materials in the existing retaining wall may not be particularly significant, the continuity of topography is an important feature of the public space on this residential block. The Board's design guidelines for basement areaways and windows discourage substantial alterations to existing topography, particularly the creation of sunken terraces:

*3.1 Basement entrances and areaways should be subordinate to and not dominate the setting of historic property unless significant alterations to the site or street have fundamentally changed the original condition.*

*3.2 Lowering the front yard of historic property to provide an at-grade entrance is generally not appropriate. New entrances should be designed to minimize disruption of existing topography.*

*3.3 It may not be possible to provide an exterior stair on properties where the first floor is close to grade, where the building is close to the sidewalk, or where the basement stair would be exposed at eye level from the sidewalk. In such instances, the extent of excavation may alter the relationship of the building to grade, overwhelm the site, or become such a prominent element that it detracts from the property's character.*

*3.4 Basement areaways should be kept to a minimum size, typically projecting no more than 36'' from the face of the building. The creation of large sunken patios or outdoor living areas in front of a primary elevation of historic property is not appropriate.*

Additionally, the Board's more general guidelines on landscaping recognize the significance of retaining walls and the berms they support:

*Almost all walls located in front or rear yards in historic districts are retaining walls. As such they contribute significantly to the character of the property and its neighborhood...Existing fences and retaining walls that contribute to the appearance of historic buildings, their landscapes and neighborhoods should be maintained and if necessary, repaired or replaced in-kind.*

The Board has provided some flexibility on this type of alteration in two recent Capitol Hill cases – the Maples at 619 D Street, SE and the Edmonds School that is before the Board again this month. In both cases, sunken basement-level terraces were approved by the Board on rather large buildings not unlike 236 Massachusetts. However, these terraces were substantially set back from the sidewalk, relatively shallow in their projection from the building, and heavily buffered from street views by landscaping. By comparison, the new seating area in this project would rest at the sidewalk's edge, would extend the entire depth of the berm, and would include no landscape screening between the seating area and the sidewalk.

Unfortunately, the shallowness of the public space on 3<sup>rd</sup> Street makes it unlikely that a compatible solution can be found while still providing enough seating and access to the proposed basement-level doors. The applicants may choose to continue exploring options for further Board review, but this element of the plan, as proposed, is not compatible with the character of the historic building, the streetscape, or the Capitol Hill Historic District.

### **Recommendation**

*HPO recommends that the Board:*

*1) Find the following items compatible with the character of the historic district, and delegate final approval to staff:*

- *Raze of the non-contributing building at 428 3<sup>rd</sup> Street, NE;*
- *Subdivision of existing lots to create six new townhouse lots on 3<sup>rd</sup> Street, NE;*
- *The addition, courtyard, and service structure behind 208 and 214 Massachusetts Avenue, NE;*
- *The garage entrance structure fronting 3<sup>rd</sup> Street and underground parking garage;*
- *The door and canopy alterations facing Massachusetts Avenue, and the penthouse expansion at 236 Massachusetts Avenue, NE;*
- *Public space alterations on Massachusetts Avenue and at the corner of 3<sup>rd</sup> Street and Massachusetts Avenue, NE, and associated conversion of a window to a door to serve the corner seating area;*

*2) Find the conceptual massing, footprint, and design direction of the new townhouses on 3<sup>rd</sup> Street compatible with the character of the historic district, and direct the applicants to return to the Board for final approval of materials and design details when ready;*

*3) Find the proposed removal of the berm on 3<sup>rd</sup> Street to be incompatible with the purposes of the preservation act;*

*4) Condition this approval on the understanding that it should not be construed as approval for any necessary zoning relief.*